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PRESIDENT'S LETTER
December 04

“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Thanksgiving naturally leads into Christmas. The shopping spree hits full stride on “Black Friday” - the day after Thanksgiving. Pastors take a deep breath and come up for air on the other side of Epiphany. Advent wreaths and advent calendars count down the days until Christmas. You may have noticed that the theme of my Christmas letter is the same as the theme of my November “thanksgiving letter.” It is both right and proper that at Christmas as at all times, we give thanks to God for His indescribable Gift. This is what our Christmas celebration is all about. God’s gift to us is wrapped up in this baby Jesus.

God has committed to us, His redeemed and forgiven people, the glorious ministry of reconciliation. This ministry of reconciliation was revealed when the Light shined into the darkness of human existence (John 1:5). The eternal Word (Logos) became flesh so that He could reconcile the entire world to God. The Holy Son of God became human in order that He could be made sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in connection with Him. This is the miracle of God’s indescribable Gift to us. “For God so loved the world that **He gave** His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

There are many traditions which have evolved over time to help us understand and celebrate Christmas. As so often happens, the form has become more important than the substance. Some of my favorite services are the mid-week Advent services. They give us a quiet oasis in the midst of our busy weeks to meditate on God’s gift to us. People are cramming more and more things into the month before Christmas with the result that they work themselves into a state of frenzied exhaustion. Advent is an opportunity to help our people prepare not only for Christmas but also for the coming of Christ. At this time of the year, tempers have a hair-trigger, nerves become frayed, children are overwhelmed by the onslaught of material things. We need to help our people find a quiet place in the storm of what has become a materialistic orgy. As pastors, we need to be careful that we do not contribute to the frenzy of Christmas by scheduling and emphasizing unnecessary activities and social parties.

In your personal and family life, you need to be very careful that you are not so overwhelmed by the preparations for the celebration of Christmas for your members that you neglect your own spiritual needs and the needs of your family. One of the most memorable Christmases we had was during a Hong Kong flu break out. Sharon was down in bed for over a week. Nothing got done except the bare essentials. It was time to get back to the basics and thank God for His indescribable Gift. During Advent, you need to spend more time in your studies and in your personal meditation of the word of God. With laser sharp precision you need to help your people cut through the fog of the world’s celebration of Christmas and focus with laser-sharp precision on what God has given us. The more material things you have, the more your children are going to miss the reason for the season.

Advent is a time of repentance as marked by purple (the same as Lent) altar hangings and the purple candles in the Advent wreath. It is necessary to preach about sin and expose the depravity of the flesh to understand the Gift of Christmas. Advent echoes the preparation of John the Baptist, “who was preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke

3:3). Surely there is a great need for reconciliation with God Whom we have sinned against. The message of Advent and Christmas is one of sin and grace. For where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

Christmas is pure grace. God gave His only Son just because He loved real sinners. This gift of grace is not something that we have earned or deserved. This is the miracle of giving. Grace is what makes God's Gift to us indescribable. Words cannot fully describe what God has given us in Jesus, Who came into this world to reconcile us to God by His perfect life and His innocent suffering and death. Our celebrations need to emphasize this indescribable Gift of God to us. We view again with wonder what God has done. We need to work at bringing this emphasis of grace, of God's Gift to us back into our Christmas preparations and celebrations.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Consider the contrast between the lowliness of that first Christmas and the gaudy, extravaganza that we call Christmas today. Give thanks to God this Christmas for His love and grace as revealed in Jesus Christ, Who emptied Himself of His divine glory so that He could become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself and has committed to us the Word of reconciliation.

This Prince, God's very Son, came here, Guest among the sons of fear.
His banner leads us out of woe, And to his royal hall we go.
Kyrieleis!

To earth he came so poor to bring Great compassion as our King
That rich in glory we might stand With angels in the heavenly land.
Kyrieleis!

Such grace toward us now fills with light Length and breadth and depth and height!
O endless ages, raise your voice, O Christendom rejoice, rejoice!
Kyrieleis!

"We Praise, O Christ, Your Holy Name"

Thanks be to God for His indescribable Gift! Kyrieleis!

A blessed Christmas from my family to yours.
John Schierenbeck